

Hungarian Connections to Britain and America

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Tibor Frank. *Ethnicity, Propaganda, Myth-Making; Studies on Hungarian Connections to Britain and America, 1848-1945*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1999. 391 pages, ill., map.

Tibor Frank is keenly aware of the distortions in Hungarian intellectual life and statecraft caused by agents and ideologues. He completed his doctorate in English studies in 1976 when English-language skills were still a rare commodity in Hungary.¹ At the time there were no American bagel shops in Budapest, few English-speaking tourists, and contacts with the West fluctuated between the wariness of the Cold War and the possibilities of detente. Frank's *Ethnicity, Propaganda, Myth-Making* includes twenty-two articles published over a twenty-year period between the late 1970s and the late 1990s. The essays document the dramatic journey of a generation of Hungarian scholars that began its struggle against a communist provincialism and now seeks contact points for a dialogue across the Atlantic. Frank, with his exceptionally adept English-language skills, was among the first to "bridge" the nuances of both American/British and Hungarian historiography. The three sections of this volume reflect the author's intellectual odyssey. Frank chronicles a century of Hungarian historiographical upheavals: imperial (Habsburg), rightist, fascist, Stalinist, de-Stalinist and post-Communist. Attempts to distort knowledge in the service of a political agenda were faced already in the first half of the nineteenth century when Magyar patriots, according to Frank, found themselves "in awkward historical situations where they had to wear masks, hide behind dubious political forces to preserve their effectiveness, go into emigration, internal or external, or meet tragic death" (9).

The last and shortest section of Frank's book is a series of essays published between 1979 and 1984 when the limits of goulash communism on intellectual life were being tested. Writing at this time, Frank tweaked Marxist orthodoxy by exploring the hostility between Marx and Kossuth, thereby challenging the Kossuth cult of the Kádár era.² He depicts both of these "icons" as human, all-too human. He also poked fun at the

legend that Kossuth learned English solely by reading Shakespeare. Kossuth, Frank insisted, wrapped himself in a politically convenient Shakespearean guise — even if he did translate five scenes from *Macbeth*. In Frank's examination of the counter-revolutionary 1850s, he unveils a tawdry world where the Habsburg secret service spread disinformation to discredit the Kossuth emigration, while the émigrés finished the job by their back-biting and constant quarrelling among themselves.

Frank's volume includes two essays from his biographical work on Gustav Zerffi, a police agent of the post-1849 repressive Bach period, who had insinuated himself with the émigrés.³ These studies trace the career of this secret agent and build an indictment of the practices of agents and propagandists. Frank shows that Metternichean censorship, unlike the censorship of the Bach period, had been quite openly practiced, and that, in typical Austrian fashion, it was rigorous in its standards but lax in its enforcement. Frank's impatience with unprincipled sleuths, state-influenced propaganda, and less-than-accurate historians, journalists, and memorialists of this earlier era, captures his and his compatriots' growing disgust with the decaying state apparatus of the late-Kádár period.

While the image of the Hungarian revolutionary was championed after the defeat of the Hungarian War of Independence in 1848/49, the Hungarian immigrant received a cool reception in the United States later in the century. The book's most recent and largest section (almost half of the text) smartly recasts the Hungarian nationalities problem of the Dualist period into a study of emigration from Hungary to the United States. It reflects the author's years teaching at the University of California, Santa Barbara and UCLA, between 1987 and 1991. With maps and statistics Frank establishes that emigration from Hungary was disproportionately a flow of minorities, particularly disadvantaged Slovaks. Frank writes with sensitivity about the "emigration psychosis" and the travails experienced by newcomers to the USA in fitting into an American society increasingly ambivalent about the "new immigrants." In his investigation of the high suicide rates of Austro-Hungarian returnees, Frank examined psychiatric cases, which he found collected in the archives of the Hungarian Institute of Mental Health. Here, as elsewhere, Frank is extremely resourceful in tapping new, hitherto unused, sources.

Hungarian historiography still operates in the shadows of R.W. Seton-Watson's condemnation of Hungarian pre-World War I minority policies.⁴ Frank places these policies of "forced Magyarization" into a new perspective by casting them into a wider context, one that includes resurgent American nativism. The rise of anthropology in the late nineteenth century in Austria-Hungary and the United States accentuated the monitoring and labelling of "new immigrants" and minorities. Although

many migrated from Hungary to retain their minority ethnic identities, "unassimilating immigrants remained unwanted aliens in both worlds for considerable periods of time." (8) Anthropologist Franz Boaz sought to calm U.S. immigration authorities who nervously supervised the quality of the "American race" with an anthropological survey of the *Changes in Bodily Form of Descendant of Immigrants*. This anthropometric study of the children of Hungarian-Americans claimed that immigrants "approach the qualities of a new, common American stock as early as in the second generation." (36) Frank underscores the fantasy of craniology and the paranoia motivating U.S. government surveillance of the Austro-Hungarian emigration between 1891 and 1907.

America's anxiety-ridden nativism culminated in the restrictive immigration laws of 1924. Frank reconstructs the American-Hungarian relationship in a comparative fashion in which American preoccupations at times crowd out Hungarian concerns. In dealing with these issues, Frank most often, adopts Western historiographical questions to a Hungarian context and subjects them to the rigors of his own archival findings in new or hitherto overlooked sources.

The book's middle section, dealing with "the politics of propaganda," contains three essays on mid-nineteenth century Hungary and six on Horthyite Hungary. Here, Frank turns to the ambivalence and contradiction of cultural middlemen. He begins with the troubled, nascent nationalism of a Metternichean censor caught between two worlds, and ends with the twentieth-century subject of U.S. Minister John F. Montgomery's admiration and postwar apologia for Admiral Horthy. While historians often use travelogues to illustrate the arrogance of great power observers, Frank uses this "unlikely friendship" to show how diplomats frequently become the mouthpiece of the new friends they make during their foreign assignments. The resulting "factual non-fiction," Frank contends, "can be more biased or subjective than a work of fiction." (251)

The articles on the interwar period are the least satisfying in the volume. Several overlap and could have been consolidated. They are not yet free of the hasty rehabilitation of the Horthy era in the Antal years, with imagology, so important to the rest of the volume, less rigorously examined here. These articles do underscore the fluctuating and transient nature of American Magyarophobia/ Magyarophilia as well as the rocky romance of Hungarians with the English-speaking world.

In this part of the book a series of essays examine the publicistic outreach of *The Hungary Quarterly*, the fate of its converted Jewish editor József Balogh, and the abortive effort to produce a canonical *Hungarian History* in English during the opening stages of World War II. Frank pays tribute to Balogh, who was "killed by the Nazis, or their Hungarian

friends.... He met the death of a war hero." (275) Balogh was, however, also a victim of interwar illusions and a practitioner of half-measures that took few intellectual risks, shunned new authors or methods, and banked instead on well-known names.⁵ After reading these articles, one wonders whether either Balogh' and his associates' lamentations over the dismemberment of Greater Hungary, or the new project of asserting Hungary's cultural superiority over her neighbours, could find sympathetic audiences outside Hungary proper.

In the volume under review here, Frank shows himself to be a master of the short, pungent essay, an average of seventeen pages per item in a volume with 380 pages of text. Some are extended notes, commentaries on discovered documents and letters; while others are more extensive and elaborate. Each essay typically confronts the reader with some striking new information or source that is shown to enliven an important, if often apparently stale, question. The method often serves as the message: archival investigation is the antidote to contemporary myth-making and a shrunken nationalist canon. Reading Frank stimulates one to think of untapped archival sources from which essays could be written. They were published in an English admirable for its clarity, effectiveness and vigour.

NOTES

¹ Tibor Frank, "The British image of Hungary 1865/1870," Ph.D. dissertation, Budapest: Loránd Eötvös University, Dept. of English, 1976.

² Tibor Frank, *Marx és Kossuth* (Budapest: Magvető, 1985).

³ Tibor Frank, *From Habsburg agent to Victorian scholar: G.G. Zerffi, 1820-1892* (Boulder, Colo.: Social Science Monographs; Highland Lakes, N.J.: Atlantic Research and Publications, 2000).

⁴ R.W. Seton-Watson (1879-1951), in a series of publicistic works, but especially in his *Racial Problems in Hungary* (1908), denounced Hungary's governments for "oppressing" the country's nationalities and imposing forced Magyarization on them. His efforts in this direction contributed heavily to the decline of the favourable image of Hungary in Western, particularly British, eyes. On this subject see Géza Jeszenszky, *Az elvesztett presztízs: Magyarország megítélésének megváltozása Nagy-Britanniában (1894-1918)* [The lost prestige: the transformation of Hungary's image in Great Britain (1894-1918)] (Budapest: Magvető, 1986).

⁵ Tibor Frank, *Discussing Hitler: Advisers of U.S. diplomacy in Central Europe, 1934-1941* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2003); *Tanulmányok a Magyar Rádió történetéből: 1925-1945* [Studies in the History of Hungarian Radio] (Budapest: Tömegkommunikációs Kutatóközpont, 1975); *Genius in exile: Professional immigration from interwar Hungary to the United States* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999).